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ABSTRACT

Observers are known to form inferences about an actor on the basis of the actor's behavior, regardless of the external forces contributing to that behavior. Two studies were conducted to determine whether this inferential error would also occur at the level of group activity. In the first study, 70 undergraduates read about a decision made by a nation, either the United States, Holland, or the Soviet Union, and then indicated the extent to which they believed that the nation's citizens held attitudes consistent with that decision. The results indicated that subjects made correspondent inferences between the nation's decision and the citizens' attitudes, particularly when the nation was an outgroup nation. In the second study, 60 undergraduates read a vignette about a jury decision which contained information on the final jury vote, the decision rule, and the final decision of guilt or innocence. The results indicated that subjects focused on the decision of guilt or innocence, and not just on the final jury vote, when attributing attitudes to jurors. These data suggest that people do commit the group attribution error, a tendency to assume a correspondence between a group decision and members' preferences, even when such an assumption may be unwarranted. The results from the first study further suggest that people are more likely to commit this error with regard to an outgroup than to an ingroup decision. (NRB)

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The Attribution of Attitudes to Groups

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Abstract

Observers are known to form inferences about an actor on the basis of the actor's behavior, regardless of the external forces contributing to that behavior (Ross, 1977). The purpose of the present research was to determine whether this inferential error also occurs at the level of group activity. It was proposed that people often commit the group attribution error, the tendency to assume that group decisions and group members' attitudes are correspondent. In Experiment 1, subjects read about a decision made by a nation, either the United States (U.S.), Holland, or the Soviet Union, and were then asked to indicate the extent to which the nation's citizens held attitudes consistent with that decision. It was found that subjects made correspondent inferences, particularly when the nation was an outgroup nation. Experiment 2 found that subjects who were exposed to a jury decision focused on the decision of guilt or innocence, and not just on the final jury vote, when attributing attitudes to jurors. The results are related to previous research on the fundamental attribution error, the actor-observer difference, and polarized appraisals of outgroups.

The Attribution of Attitudes to Groups

Since Allport's (1954) classic analysis of the cognitive determinants of prejudice, social psychologists have been interested in how people form inferences about groups. Investigators interested in uncovering the processes by which we make attributions to groups have often employed an experimental paradigm in which subjects are first exposed to information about a single group member. Following this exposure, subjects are usually tested for the degree to which they have generalized from the single member to the entire group (e.g., Hamil, Wilson, & Nisbett, 1980; Quattrone & Jones, 1980).

This paradigm, however, neglects the fact that we are often exposed to information about groups that does not come in the form of individual behavior. For example, the media often blitz us with information about group actions and decisions without reference to any single individual's behavior at all. The question we address in the present research is the following: Do people automatically form inferences of group members on the basis of a single group decision? If so, people might be committing an attribution error since many group decisions are determined by group decision rules as well as members' preferences.

To illustrate, consider a group decision made on the basis of majority rule. This decision will generally be in agreement with, or correspondent to, the attitudes of at least half of the voting group members. However, a decision made by a single member, a department

chair for instance, or a dictator, need not be correspondent to the attitudes of any other members. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence which suggests that some group decision schemes are much better than others at producing decisions that are correspondent with individual preferences (e.g., Davis, 1969; Niemi & Riker, 1976; Smoke & Zajonc, 1962).

We propose that at times people commit what we call the group attribution error, the tendency to overlook the group decision scheme and instead focus on the group decision itself when attributing attitudes to group members. In exactly the same way that people fail to properly weight external constraints on individual behavior, we suggest that they fail to account properly for structural contraints on group decisions when making inferences about people's attitudes from group decisions.

In the two studies that we report, subjects were instructed to read a short vignette that told of a group decision. Subjects were then asked to indicate the extent to which they believed that the members of the group held attitudes consistent with that decision. In Experiment 1, subjects read that either the United States (U.S.), Holland, or the Soviet Union arrived at a decision. One half of the subjects read that this decision was to establish relations with another nation, while the other half read that the decision was to sever relations with this other nation. We predicted two significant effects to emerge. First, subjects were expected to readily form inferences about the citizens of a nation on the basis of the nation's decision. This finding would suggest that people commit the group

attribution error. Second, we expected an interaction between the two variables to occur such that subjects would make stronger attributions for the outgroup nations than for the ingroup nation (the U.S.). This prediction is derived from previous research on the actor-observer difference that is associated with the fundamental attribution error: Just as people make more correspondent inferences about others than about themselves, people may also make more correspondent inferences about outgroup members than about fellow ingroup members.

Experiment 1

Method

The subjects were 70 students at a major western university who participated to fulfill a course requirement. A 3 X 2 between-subjects factoral design was employed, with three levels of nation (U.S., Holland, Soviet Union) crossed with two levels of decision (positive, negative). In each of the six conditions, subjects read a vignette that told of a decision made by the political leader of one of the three nations. The decision was either to establish or to break off diplomatic relations with "Berelone," a small island country located far away. After reading the vignette, subjects were given a questionnaire that tested their recall of certain events in the story. In this questionnaire, subjects were asked, "How much does the typical citizen of the U.S./Holland/Soviet Union like Berelone?" A one to seven scale was employed where "1" was marked "not at all" and "7" was labelled "completely."

Results

The manipulation checks revealed that more than 97 percent of the subjects correctly remembered the names of the counties involved and the nation's decision. A 3 (nation) by 2 (decision) ANOVA of subjects' attributions revealed three significant effects. First, a main effect for nation was uncovered, $F(2, 64) = 3.81$, $p < .03$, indicating that U.S. attitudes toward the fictitious nation were perceived to be more favorable than Dutch and Russian attitudes. The analysis also yielded a strong decision effect, $F(1, 64) = 145.84$, $p < .001$, which demonstrated the tendency of subjects to assume that a decision made by a nation's leader reflects the attitudes of the citizens of that nation. Of greatest interest, however, was the interaction obtained between nation and decision, $F(2, 64) = 4.97$, $p < .01$. Consistent with our predictions, the interaction indicated that the correspondence between outgroup decisions and outgroup attitudes was perceived to be greater than the correspondence between the ingroup decision and ingroup attitudes. The means associated with this analysis are displayed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The purpose of Experiment 2 was to clarify and extend the findings of the first study. In Experiment 2, subjects read about a decision made by a 12-person jury. Subjects read that the jury voted either 8-4 or 10-2 in favor of guilty. In addition, one third read that to convict the defendant the jury had to vote at least 7-5 in favor of

guilty, one third read that this criterion was 10-2, and one third read that unanimity was required. Thus, subjects were given three pieces of information: the final jury vote, the decision rule, and the final decision of guilt or innocence. We predicted that subjects would attend as much to the final jury decision of guilt or innocence as to the jury vote when forming inferences of juror attitudes.

Experiment 2

Method

The subjects were 60 undergraduates who participated to fulfill a course requirement. Subjects were instructed to read a three-paragraph vignette, in which a civil court case involving a 12-person jury was described. Subjects were provided with three relevant facts regarding the decision: the final jury vote (either 8-4 or 10-2 in favor of guilty), the number of votes necessary to convict (either 7, 10, or 12), and the final decision based on the configuration of the above facts (either guilty or innocent). Thus, the design of the study was a 2 (jury vote) X 3 (decision rule) between-subjects factorial. After reading the vignette, subjects were given a questionnaire to assess their recall of the details of the story. Imbedded among these questions was the primary dependent measure, "What do you believe is the attitude of the typical juror concerning the guilty or innocence of the defendent?" Subjects responded on a scale from 1 (completely guilty) to 7 (completely innocent).

Results

The manipulation checks revealed that 95 percent or more of the subjects correctly recalled the final jury vote, the decision rule, and

the decision to convict or acquit. Thus, subjects were clearly recalling the relevant details of the story.

An attribution of the average attitude toward guilt should clearly be influenced by the number of jurors voting for a guilty verdict. The group attribution error would imply that the actual group decision—guilty or innocent—would also be influencial. Subjects' attributions were subjected to a 2 (jury vote) X 3 (decision rule) ANOVA. The analysis revealed no effect for vote ($F < 1$), but it did uncover a main effect for decision rule, $F(2, 54) = 3.64$, $p < .04$, and a slight interaction between the two variables, $F(2, 54) = 2.57$, $p < .09$. Consistent with our predictions, these effects indicate that subjects focused on the final decision of guilt or innocence when forming inferences about juror attitudes. Subjects' mean attributions are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

General Discussion

The data presented here indicate that people tend to assume a correspondence between a group decision and members' preferences, even when such an assumption may be unwarranted. They do so because they pay too much attention to the decision and too little to the process by which the group arrives at the decision. This tendency, termed the group attribution error, is an interesting one because its structure mirrors that of another bias, the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). In both types of inferential errors, individuals tend to assume

an overly simplistic agreement between a decision or choice and an attitude or preference presumed to underlie it.

The results of Experiment 1 are especially of interest because they suggest that we are more likely to commit the group attribution error with regard to an outgroup decision than an ingroup decision. Such a finding parallels the actor-observer difference that is associated with the fundamental attribution error: Just as observers tend to attribute attitudes to an actor on the basis of the actor's behavior, members of ingroups tend to attribute attitudes to an outgroup on the basis of the outgroup's behavior.

Future research on the group attribution error should perhaps be directed toward uncovering the processes that underlie the phenomenon. The ingroup-outgroup difference, for instance, would seem to have close ties with a line of research that has recently examined to tendency of people to evaluate outgroup members in terms of extremes (e.g., Linville & Jones, 1980; Park & Rothbart, 1982). Past research in this area indicates that people make extreme assessments of outgroups when they perceive the outgroup as being of homogeneous composition. Whether or not the ingroup-outgroup difference in the tendency to commit the group attribution error is mediated by perceptions of homogeneity and variability is just one of several questions that seems ripe for future inquiry.

There is also the question of whether subjects are committing an attribution error, or if they merely believe that group members form their attitudes on the basis of the group's decision. Indeed, the notion that attitudes follow decisions is an old one in social

psychology (Bem, 1972). This issue is also one that needs to be addressed in future research on group attributional phenomena.

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Table 1.

Mean Attitude Attributions as a Function of Nationality of Leader and Decision in Experiment 1.

	Decision		
Leader	Establish Relations	Sever Relations	Mean
U.S.	5.41	3.26	4.34
Holland	5.00	2.45	3.73
Soviet Union	5.88	2.00	3.94
Mean	5.43	2.57	4.00

Note. High numbers refer to a greater attributed liking of the target nation.

Table 2.

Mean Attitude Attributions as a Function of Jury Vote and Decision Rule in Experiment 2.

	Jury Vote		
Decision Rule	8 - 4	10 - 2	Mean
7 - 5	5.60	5.35	5.48
10 - 2	4.85	5.60	5.23
12 - 0	4.90	4.75	4.83
Mean	5.12	5.23	5.18

Note: High numbers indicate a greater attributed preference for a guilty verdict.